

A GIFT FOR COUSIN JACK

A DRAMA IN ONE ACT

BY

JAMES C. BURKE

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(A Play in One Act)

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SETTING: The action takes place in the guest parlor in the old family home of Thomas Hennecy, Sr., near Georgetown, South Carolina. Thomas, Jr. – called UNCLE THOMAS – a successful designer of surgical instruments and medical equipment, lives with his widowed sister, Malvina Bateman – called AUNT MALVINA – and her son, AUBREY. Iris Shaw, always referred to as MISS IRIS, is visiting with them over Christmas. She is the daughter of the Thomas and Malvina's baby sister, Sophronia. Thomas, as of late, also employed Iris as his personal secretary. There is a guest in the house, Cousin Jack – or so he claims. He is the deranged, conman, twin brother of Jack, Rudy. The date is December 24, 1922. It is late afternoon.

AT RISE: AUNT MALVINA and UNCLE THOMAS are describing to MISS IRIS what happened to their former household cook, Mr. Deschamps.

AUNT MALVINA

Mr. Deschamps was very loyal to us. When he left our hire, he required his usual pay, and no more. The fellow liked music and small dogs; and had no fault other than a disdain for yellow automobiles, a strange quality in a man. Still, I think he was the best cook we ever had. His chickens were tender, and never a soggy pie crust to ruin everything. All the pots were scrubbed to a shine, and arranged in order by size. Ah, poor devil! – He lost his brother in the war; then his wife cut her throat with a straight razor... He found her, you know? Yes, indeed! Such a mess one makes when opening their blood vessels. He went to his room, and took a gun to his head.

MISS IRIS

My word, Aunt Malvina!

AUNT MALVINA

It happened before Christmas.

UNCLE THOMAS

He would say, "There's another yellow car! Oh, how I hate the color; and isn't it a sin to paint such a fine piece of machinery in THAT. I would rather live beside a hospital and watch them cart away the dead than ride in anything yellow, sir!" That is what I remember best about Howard Deschamps... Alas, Miss Iris, he lost a brother during the war.

AUNT MALVINA

Louis... Poor fellow was engaged to marry a beautiful girl named Lucinda. Two weeks before his field hospital was shelled, John received a message saying the girl had been killed in a train wreck. Louis tended the horses there. He had been twice wounded on the front, but refused to go home. The surgeon kept him from bleeding to death. But John, my dear husband, was killed on the spot.

MISS IRIS (puzzled)

Louis?

UNCLE THOMAS

Yes, Louis was Malvina's husband's second cousin on his mother's side who happen to be a Shaw, so he was related to your father – cousin, I guess – poor fellow!

MISS IRIS

Is he related to Mr. Deschamps?

AUNT MALVINA

No, I was thinking about my John... Then, there is our brave Calvin – poor fellow!

(On the mention of her father, Iris changes the subject.)

MISS IRIS

Aubrey tells me you have kippered herring and boiled potatoes for lunch every day. Why so, Uncle?

UNCLE THOMAS

Simple, and filling, I say. One should avoid heaviness in the food one eats - as with all else - so as to have a clear mind. The stomach speaks the loudest, but cares little more than to be heard and satisfied. We forget that life is short.

MISS IRIS

All the reason more to enjoy it!

UNCLE THOMAS

I've enjoyed as much as I need; now, a little peace to clear the mist... I would have it this way... for... never mind. Who were we talking about, Miss Iris?

MISS IRIS

Mr. Deschamps, the man who killed himself.

UNCLE THOMAS

Yes, Deschamps, God rest his soul. The faithful deserves, at least, our gifts - A good cook, all the more.

MISS IRIS

Having never married, I understand why.

UNCLE THOMAS

There's a reason for that. A bad choice in ladies. All were, in some way, a little off in the head. Even so, being crippled in this leg through no fault of my own, I grew tired of their pity. Still, if there was a glowing coal in the hearth, a fire could be kindled; only, when I looked, there were dead coals under the pile of ashes... I have my name, my work, and some substance; how nice it would have been to have it all when I was young. It is the humor of the gods - To withhold the prize till it is devalued to necessity; and damn the lucky with their own good fortune. Best to have a little later, than too much, too soon. At this late hour, I consider myself blessed with more labor than suffering.

MISS IRIS

The work is the thing, isn't it?

UNCLE THOMAS

Anything worth doing is worth the work. So? Whatever became of your beau?

MISS IRIS

My Charlie? Well, they say he had an accident. He must have drowned when his boat capsized. They never found his body.

AUNT MALVINA

Poor fellow...

(Enter AUBREY)

AUBREY

Sir, it's time for supper. Six o'clock, to the second...

UNCLE THOMAS (To IRIS)

Would you care for a snack? It doesn't have to be herring and potatoes; and am well prepared for guests.

AUBREY

The cook has been working on a feast for this evening's Christmas Party. We have a turkey, just out of the oven and being sliced-

UNCLE THOMAS

Turkey? ... Perhaps? Aubrey, would you think it too decadent if we had turkey sandwiches with our potatoes?

AUBREY

Tis the season, "God Rest ye Merry Gentlemen" and the like. I'm sure your lapse into moral depravity can be excused. Besides, His Lordship the Pig arose from the sleep of ages in time to stage a raid on the holiday feast. If he had succeeded, you'd be fortunate if there were enough meat on the bird for a single sandwich. But the cook, like Tiersias incarnate, foresaw the foeman's ambush, and cooked two.

UNCLE THOMAS

Aubrey, you are an ill-tempered fellow. If you were not my sister's boy, I would have found another to manage my business. Perhaps, someone a little less dramatic!

MISS IRIS

His Lordship the Pig?

AUBREY

Alas, Uncle, our dark secret is out!

AUNT ALVINA

His Lordship the Pig, as Aubrey calls him, is an upright fellow - An Artist - who has seen tragic times-

AUBREY

Oh, tragic! Tragic!

UNCLE THOMAS

Would you stop that! ... Remember, the man almost died.

AUBREY

You mean, somebody almost killed him.

UNCLE THOMAS

The man we are speaking of, Cousin Jack, was thrown off a moving omnibus-

AUBREY

He was asleep at the time!

AUNT MALVINA

I believe it to be an illness. He sleeps eighteen hours a day on average; rising just after midnight, and retiring before dawn. He is from Mother's side, and that's all I know.

MISS IRIS

Who threw him out?

UNCLE THOMAS

Another artist - They say he was insane.

AUBREY

Yes. Jack the Pig made him go stark raving mad. Jack slept all day, ate all the man's food, never paid his share of the rent, and refused to leave. As we have discovered, it is like having the house haunted by a demon - He does not have to do evil, he is the physical embodiment of something which is evil in-itself.

UNCLE THOMAS

So you think... Soon you'll have your proof. I have arranged for a showing of Jack's paintings at the State Gallery.

AUBREY

What?

UNCLE THOMAS

It's all arranged.

AUBREY

Have they seen his work?

UNCLE THOMAS

Of course not; but after setting before them a substantial endowment, the directors agreed.

AUBREY

Have you seen his work? Have you even been up to that rat hole he calls a studio?

UNCLE THOMAS

No, I haven't. An artist needs his privacy to create. Besides, if you look at that painting on the wall you can see for yourself that Jack has the makings of an exceptional artist; someone who will ascend to an honored place in good time. Remember, it's only in the last few years that my work has received any attention.

MISS IRIS

Do you have any more examples of Jack's work hanging?

UNCLE THOMAS

No... He brought this painting with him when he came to live with us.

AUBREY

And we haven't seen a one since.

AUNT MALVINA

They'll be more.

AUBREY

Your turkey is getting cold, Mother.

(SHE pauses, and then frowns at AUBREY.)

UNCLE THOMAS

It will be a fine exhibition. Then you'll applaud me for my good will, and insight...

(AUNT MALVINIA exits, followed by UNCLE THOMAS.)

MISS IRIS

Pardon me, if it seems out of place; but after taking on my mother's position as Uncle's secretary, I would like to voice my opinion on this matter-

AUBREY

Please do!

MISS IRIS

I might be wrong, but I believe they are being deceived.

AUBREY

I could tell you more... Jack, his Lordship the Pig, sleeps on the floor surrounded by all the dirty dishes he has managed to bring upstairs from the kitchen; and when he must relieve himself, he chooses to do so out the window rather than take the ten or so steps down the hallway to the upstairs facilities. Not once have I heard the running of water for a bath, nor seen him in a different set of clothes.

MISS IRIS

That is horror! Do you know why Uncle tolerates it?

AUBREY

I think it comes from not having children, and being alone all those years. He gives, and hopes to do the greatest good. Until this, I would call it wisdom. Many needy students, and young folks trying to make a way for themselves, have returned his modest gifts a thousand times over in their undying loyalty.

MISS IRIS

Not even his critics have an unkind word to say about the man.

AUBREY

This, I think, when he learns the truth, will poison some of that good will. So, we had better be rid of Cousin Jack before this gallery opening. I do not believe this painting to be of his hand. That's why I have taken great pains to have our attorney look into the matter.

(The telephone rings.)

AUBREY (cont.)

Would you excuse me.

(AUBREY answers the phone.)

Hello... Oh, yes, Oakley... Yes, I've been expecting him... Please bring Mr. Mahan to the guest parlor...

(HE hangs up the phone.)

Like I said, I don't believe this man to be an artist. Now, we will see whether my intuition has led me to the truth..

(Enter MR. MAHAN, an attorney.)

AUBREY

Miss Iris, allow me to introduce Mr. Mahan. Sir, this is Miss Iris Shaw, Aunt Sophronia's daughter.

MISS IRIS

A pleasure meeting you, sir.

MAHAN

No, dear lady, the pleasure is mine... As for our problem, Aubrey, I think we have some good news, and... well, the remainder is a bit strange.

AUBREY

Strange?

MAHAN

Yes... I think you had better take a seat...

(AUBREY and IRIS sit down in the parlor chairs. ALBERT MAHAN places his briefcase on a side table, opens it, and removes a file folder.)

The painting is the work of your third cousin, Jackson Clark, first shown as part of a retrospective of the man's works following his death in 1915. It has since been missing.

AUBREY

Stolen?

MAHAN

No...

(HE shows AUBREY a photograph.)

MAHAN (cont.)

See this ... The man on the right, the one neatly dressed, is Jackson Clark; and the one who looks like a tramp-

(AUBREY stands.)

AUBREY

Jack the Pig!

MAHAN

Yes... Rudolph Clark, twin brother of the artist, and rightful owner of this painting. And it is worth quite a sum ...

AUBREY

Then he is not as destitute as he seems.

MAHAN

Not at all. This painting is valued at \$30,000; it could fetch considerably more, if put up for auction. Clark was considered an innovator - fusing expressionism with a more translucent style. He was a respected academic, as well.

AUBREY

Alright, I understand. We have a parasite living under our roof, masquerading as his brother; in the unlikely position of claiming a fortune. Why hasn't he?

MAHAN

I don't know... Rudy Clark is a mystery: no criminal record; never graduated from school; never held a job... He was married once, and fathered a son.

AUBREY

A wife and son?

MAHAN

Yes. The wife died of cancer a few years ago; the son, however, seems to be an accountant for a company that imports coffee.

MISS IRIS

Not quite in his father's footsteps.

AUBREY

Do you think we can speak with him?

MAHAN

I'll have him here before evening, if you like. When I conversed with him over the phone this morning, he seemed more than willing.

AUBREY

Good. We'll see him after daybreak festivities – Uncle gets carried away during this season, as you well know. You had better come.

MISS IRIS

I must ask a question while both of you are in the same room. It has only been since February when my mother passed away, and I took over her position. She was completely discrete about life in this household. I'm just beginning to learn about people such as Howard Deschamps and his wife; Mrs. Nance, the housekeeper, who was killed in a car wreck; and now His Lordship the Pig. It would seem that Uncle Thomas and Aunt Malvina have turned their home into a museum of lost souls. Why?

MAHAN

I don't think they intended it to be that way.

AUBREY

And it has nothing to do with the house. It has everything to do with giving, and gifts. Uncle loves to give gifts. He lives for this season so he has an excuse to give something to everybody without them feeling awkward about it.

MAHAN

Mrs. Nance, for one, needed an advance on her salary to have her car repaired. He gave her a Christmas bonus that was twice what she needed; so much so, she indulged herself and bought new white wall tires and had the whole thing painted bright yellow, while neglecting to have the brakes fixed.

MISS IRIS

Is that the reason for Mr. Deschamps' dislike of yellow?

AUBREY

Of course, Mr. Deschamps and Mrs. Nance were lovers. Mother knew, but did not tell Uncle. Nevertheless, Howard was a strange bird. There was a man who refused gifts of any kind. He was gone Christmas morning before the turkey had time to cool. He never picked up his yearly gift, or attended the party on Christmas Eve.

MAHAN

Never told a one of us he graduated top of his class in college - He was just the cook.

AUBREY

And nothing about his wife.

MISS IRIS

Did she really cut her throat?

AUBREY

She was a lunatic. A real wild woman they tell me; but he never had her committed.

MAHAN

He took odd jobs from town to town; renting dismal apartments in places where nobody would care enough to get to know him, or inquire about his wife. He was finally able to save enough for a modest cottage. Yet, it was far from a happy nest. They say the window of her room was fitted with an iron grate, and the door was padlocked.

AUBREY

Strange; she didn't use the gun. It would have been cleaner.

MISS IRIS

What about the gun?

MAHAN

He kept a journal. It said the gun was for his own protection... from her. An unhappy man, overall; a gift would have done him good.

AUBREY

Ah, but he could recognize a gift from a curse.

MAHAN

Throughout his life, Uncle Thomas has retained the innocence of a child - an even a childish denial that the evil of the world cannot be erased by granting wishes. As for Mr. Aubrey, and myself... and in time, perhaps you, as was your mother, the truth will become obvious. Not only do we protect him from the world, we protect the world from being saved by him. The same holds true of your Aunt Malvina. They have a fine time with each other - perpetual playmates to the end. Yet, she is a tad more worldly.

MISS IRIS

He's given the world the designs for sixteen excellent surgical instruments. He built a company that is known throughout the nation as the finest manufacturer of surgical steel money can buy.

AUBREY

And we need to see that it stays that way. It's all very simple: if his concern is with objects, he gives the world good things. People are, however, not as malleable as steel. You can not give the finest surgical instruments in the world to a child and expect him to perform an operation; nor make a man a journalist simply by giving him a typewriter; or have him produce art by giving him paint and brushes; and there are some things we all desire that should never be given.

MISS IRIS

What do mean?

AUBREY

The means to save the world.

MAHAN

So... I'll be speaking to the young Mr. Clark this afternoon, and see what can be done about the situation. I believe we might be able to make a case for mental illness with regard to his father; and with luck, all is ordered for the best.

AUBREY

The son gets the painting, and his lordship gets a padded room.

(MISS IRIS stands beside the Christmas Tree gazing at the ornaments.)

MAHAN

We seem to be acting as some perverse Santa Clause who comes to take gifts away - An Anti-Clause, if you like.

(MISS IRIS takes an ornament in her hand. It is a baby Jesus in the manger.)

MISS IRIS

They tell me he came to save the world ...

AUBREY

I thought you were a believer?

MISS IRIS

So I profess ...

(SHE turns around to AUBREY.)

And you Mr. Aubrey?

AUBREY

Catholic... Mother is Episcopalian, of course – there is a difference of opinion between us.

MISS IRIS

And you Mr. Mahan?

MAHAN

I was baptized a Methodist, but since... well, I don't know... my father, you see. My mother's family was Baptist, for the most. Religion is too complicated for me. Why, if I may ask?

(MISS IRIS turns back to the Tree. SHE holds the ornament up to the light.)

MISS IRIS (looking only at the ornament)

Strange... Today, I feel very Christian... Saving the world from saviors.

(End Of Scene 1.)

SCENE TWO

SETTING: The same. Christmas eve.

AT RISE: The party is over, and one can hear UNCLE THOMAS's voice offstage as he speaks with his remaining guests. In the room, MAHAN is seated in a chair, AUBREY stands beside the Christmas Tree. MAHAN stands when MISS IRIS enters through the doors leading to the entrance hall with a young man, HAMILTON CLARK.

AUBREY

Welcome, Mr. Clark... I'm Aubrey Bateman, assistant director of Henneyc Surgical Instruments, and this is our attorney, Albert Mahan.

(HE shakes hands with AUBREY, and then MAHAN shakes HAMILTON's hand.)

MAHAN

As we discussed on the telephone this afternoon, there is a valuable painting we have that seems to ultimately belong to you.

CLARK

You mean, could be mine ...

MAHAN

You are the only heir we could find.

CLARK

Legally, that might be true. But my father was not exactly a responsible sort.

AUBREY

When was the last time you spoke with him?

CLARK

We've never spoken.

MISS IRIS

Never?

CLARK

I was eleven years old when he disappeared, but never a word passed between us. He slept all day, and was only awake between midnight and dawn. I doubt he ever knew he had a son!

AUBREY

Even then, he slept all day?

CLARK

As far as I know.

AUBREY

Then how did he make a living?

CLARK

He never worked a day in his life! His brother sent money; and when he died, my father disappeared... My mother, she met him at a gathering of artistic and intellectual types at his brother's house. He was awake at the time; and spouting off nonsense about being a traveler in another world, the realm of dreams. Saying how the world we live in might be a dream to those who live in our dreams. From what I gather, it was a compelling performance. He claimed to be a spiritual sage - an artist who needed nothing from the material world. She fell for his romantic artist disguise; they made passionate love, and she became expectant... so the story goes. The love affair lasted a full evening, and was helped along by my mother's inclination to get a little uninhibited when in her cups. His brother arranged the rest to avoid a scandal that might jeopardize his university position.

MAHAN

There was a marriage? I mean-

CLARK

In broad daylight... In a church, no less! ... Two longshoremen were employed to wrench him from his bedding - on the floor; dragging him kicking a screaming like a madman to the first and last bath of his life - an icy cold one!

AUBREY

Wonderful!

CLARK

A doctor injected him with stimulants; and with my mother jabbing him with a hat pin hidden in the sleeve of her gown; the whole wicked proceedings were executed. She went on with her life, and he to the vacuum of his dreams - rising only to raid the cupboard when everybody had retired. He was more a presence than a person ... a ghost in the house.

AUBREY

A demon!

CLARK

And the stench that emanated from his room was like death! When he left the house, it remained... She burnt his bedding, scrubbed down the room; but it remained. It was like the house was infected with a disease! It drove us to the point of insanity...

CLARK (cont.)

At eighteen, with my first good pay in hand, I bought wallpaper, paint and varnish; and my mother and I stripped that house floor, walls, and ceilings to start again.

(MISS IRIS comes closer.)

MISS IRIS

My God... my heart goes out to you-

CLARK

What's past is past. I'm an accountant - have a good education - working for a company that imports coffee. I'm happy just knowing that I help drowsy people keep from falling asleep on the job.

MAHAN

Hurrah, my boy!

CLARK

Yes, I work. I uphold my responsibilities: always at work on time; productive and alert. It's right, you know.

AUBREY

Right, it is; for anything worth having is worth working for-

MISS IRIS

As Uncle Thomas has said-

CLARK

"To work is to pray; sloth is one of the seven deadly sins; and sleep is the playground of the evil mind."

(A pause. MISS IRIS continues.)

MISS IRIS

He said, "Work, play, eat, and sleep in moderation: it makes for a healthier life." Don't you think sleep has its place - some restorative quality? I mean, we must sleep...

CLARK

We must eat, also ...

(A pause)

MISS IRIS

What do you usually eat... if I may ask?

CLARK

Rice... tuna, beans... greens... when I was growing up, that was all my mother could afford. She worked as a school teacher, and Uncle Jackson paid the rent... until he died. Even though things were hard, we had occasional treats.

MISS IRIS

Nothing decadent, like chocolate cake or wine?

CLARK

Never... Now, I can afford such things; but, never...

MISS IRIS

We seem to have a strange synthesis of contraries-

AUBREY

Let's not philosophize about it. There is the painting - appraised to be worth a considerable sum. An excellent start for a young man with ambition, and a talent for investment. All of which, I'm sure, applies to you. And Mr. Mahan has some papers to make it a reality.

(MAHAN shows CLARK the documents.)

MAHAN

This document, when we present it to Judge Cozart - I believe he is still in the dinning room with Uncle - Miss Iris, could you bring in Judge Cozart?

(MISS IRIS starts to leave.)

CLARK

Just a moment. Let me read this ...

MAHAN

Of course... As you see, if uncontested - which I doubt - you can have your father declared unfit to manage his own affairs-

CLARK

Insane?

AUBREY

Well, that follows...

MAHAN

They'll be the usual hearing, the doctors will have to see him; but that is all arranged. All you have to do is sign the papers, and show up in court... In the meantime, this document allows you to take the painting into your care for safe keeping...

CLARK (reading as he speaks)

I see ...

(MISS IRIS picks up a Christmas ornament that has fallen from the Tree.)

MISS IRIS

A fallen angel, gentlemen ...

(SHE attempts to return it to the top of the Christmas Tree. MAHAN helps her.)

MAHAN

Careful, my uncle broke his hip trying to hang a Christmas wreath... about thirty years ago – you’ve noticed the limp.

MISS IRIS

“... through no fault of his own” – another synthesis of contraries.

(UNCLE THOMAS enters with a large silver bowl in hand.)

UNCLE THOMAS

Oh... a guest...

(HE comes up to CLARK.)

Were you at the party, young man? I don't believe we were introduced.

AUBREY

This is Hamilton Clark, his lordship's- I mean, Jack, our artist friend's son. He's come to take him home.

UNCLE THOMAS

Ah, another cousin... Malvina would know the particulars. Are you an artist, too?

CLARK

I'm an accountant, sir.

UNCLE THOMAS

Very good. You missed a lovely party, but you mustn't go home empty handed...

(UNCLE THOMAS holds out the bowl to CLARK.)

You must have one.

(CLARK pulls a party favor from the bowl.)

Everybody must have one.

(ALL take a favor from the bowl.)

See, you pull at the ends, and it pops! And out comes your surprise! So, Jack has a son.

MAHAN

There's more surprises about poor Jack.

AUBREY

But that can wait. Being that it's so late, and Mr. Clark must be getting home.

(At this moment a stream of fluid is seen by the light outside the garden windows.)

UNCLE THOMAS

Oh, he's awake!

(AUBREY and MAHAN look at each other with concern.)

Wouldn't you like to see him?

AUBREY

He'd rather wait till morning. Making it a Christmas gift - I'm sure you understand?

UNCLE THOMAS

But he'll be asleep by then.

(Coming up to CLARK.)

Did they tell you about your father's accident?

CLARK

Accident?

UNCLE THOMAS

Yes, that's how I found out about him. He fell off an omnibus, and nearly died of his injuries.

AUBREY

He was thrown out. The fellow that did it was arrested. There was supposed to be a trial. It was thrown out because your father failed to appear. After they picked him up, he refused to testify.

(UNCLE THOMAS takes CLARK's arm.)

UNCLE THOMAS

Come with me, my boy. Well have a happy talk, just the three of us-

(CLARK pulls away.)

CLARK

No!

(Backing off.)

No! There are things you don't understand! ... I've made a mistake ... I should have never come.

UNCLE THOMAS

Why?

CLARK

I just wanted to know; and now I know...

MISS IRIS

Know what?

CLARK

That he was real ... That he wasn't a spirit ... no, a demon.

UNCLE THOMAS (laugh)

A demon? He's an artist! Just look at this painting. Only an inspired soul, one who has the vision to look into other worlds where the gods stride... this is the work of no ordinary man!

MAHAN

Sir, I fear you have been deceived.

UNCLE THOMAS

Deceived? No, I have an eye for what is great; and I know that this is sublime!

MAHAN

Yes, it is great art ... but Jack didn't paint it.

AUBREY

It was his brother ... An established artist, Jackson Clark. He is Rudolph Clark, his twin.

UNCLE THOMAS

That can't be ... he said he was an artist ...

MISS IRIS

What he must have meant was, as young Mr. Clark told us, that he feels he has transpired to seek art on a different plane: the realm of dreams... He does not need paint and canvas to do his work, only to sleep...

UNCLE THOMAS

Oh... I misunderstood... How does one share such art with the world?

(To CLARK)

Is this true?

CLARK

You are very kind, Mr. Hennecy; but I don't know what is true; and did not come here because of the painting... I did not come to take him home, send him away to the lunatic asylum, or even to know the man. I just wanted to know that he was a man ... Not a dream.

AUBREY

Listen, son; you have a responsibility to your father. He cannot stay here.

UNCLE THOMAS

Why not? It's my house.

AUBREY

That, it is; but you have a responsibility both to this house, yourself, this young man, and his father... Perhaps, it has not occurred to you, but sleeping all day is indicative of a serious illness of the mind. Your friend has sacrificed friendship, career, health, education - and most of all - family in favor of that near death state of sleep. As painful as it seems, our only recourse is to seek medical help for our friend.

UNCLE THOMAS

You called him "friend". I never knew you felt so deeply for Jack?

AUBREY

One can come to regard his ghosts with affection, given time. Still, we cannot call a man's life productive or healthy if he is addicted to narcotics, or alcohol? Both induce a sleep of sorts; then why not sleep in-itself. Simply by bypassing the instruments, does it make the ends more acceptable?

UNCLE THOMAS

I am a rational man ... What you say is true, but he isn't doing any harm-

AUBREY

And he hasn't done any good.

MAHAN

You can't say he isn't doing any harm! Forget the fact that he has turned a whole floor of this house into a disease; look at this young man! He never knew his father! Think about what it would be like if your father was dead when you were growing up... Now, consider today... what if you could bring your father back from the grave, in his prime.

UNCLE THOMAS

Would, if I could. I loved my father ... I remember-

CLARK

This is my problem! You seemed to have forgotten. We speak the same language, but these words "father", and "family" have meaning for you; and for me, are beautiful words. When all is done, what do you go back to? The family business. And regardless, I have a sense of guilt. You have put me in an awkward situation: I am a man... I must be a father for a father, who is a child... Till this morning, he was merely a ghost.

UNCLE THOMAS

Don't worry, son. I won't abandon you... Whatever you need, I will not go back on my word. I know you are good, even though we just met, I know "good".

MISS IRIS (To CLARK)

Trust your judgment... being good and being a man are not mutually exclusive, nor are they inclusive. There is no good in whatever you choose to do, but there is a right.

UNCLE THOMAS

Good and right, aren't they one in the same?

MISS IRIS

I fear, for a virgin man, good and right is one in the same... ah, there is a slip...

CLARK

I'll see him, then! Just let me be ...

UNCLE THOMAS

I'm sure all will be resolved.

CLARK

But not for you.

(HE points to AUBREY.)

... For Mr. Bateman, perhaps?

AUBREY

... If you like... but why?

CLARK

It seems to be, you are the architect of these actions; largely for your comfort, and nobody else. The old gentleman is content with things as they are; the secretary can go home; for the lawyer, it's the nature of his profession to suspend personal involvement.

UNCLE THOMAS

Still, he is your father.

CLARK

Till this morning, I had no father. So, Mr. Bateman, we'll see him. Just you an I.

AUBREY

Me? Wouldn't it be better-

CLARK

No.

MISS IRIS

The priest and the executioner.

MAHAN

Perhaps, we should all go?

UNCLE THOMAS

A good will delegation?

AUBREY

No, he's right. The best way to get the job done is dispassionately, and with firmness. Though we have a madness in this house, it is, in essence, a criminal madness; and it aspires to test our resolve. It steals from us openly - regarding good will as foolishness, because it possesses no good will of its own - and given the opportunity to take a little, it builds on that till the whole would exist for its purpose.

UNCLE THOMAS

And what purpose is that?

AUBREY

Why, to avoid responsibility. To bring everything into chaos! To make our lives a string of unconnected random moments - like a dream - and only then, can we call sleeping art; and be repulsed by law and reason, for it might in some way restrict us from indulging in any behavior on a whim; and only then, can we treat other people as objects for our amusement.

UNCLE THOMAS

That is evil, Aubrey! We have a man, I believe, who has an illness. You have elevated this illness to a conscious evil that merely uses the man as its host. Why not say he is possessed, and call your priest?

CLARK

Evil has its own smell.

UNCLE THOMAS

So what do we do?

MAHAN (With documents)

You've read these, Mr. Clark. Sign them, and be done with it. Try to reason with him, if you like. I must warn you; this is the first time I've seen such a case as this; yet, I know from other instances that insanity is stubbornly comfortable. If you are not prepared, it will just get a good running start.

CLARK

You mean, he'll disappear.

MAHAN

Exactly.

AUBREY

That would solve the problem.

MISS IRIS

For us; and even, for young Mr. Clark. His lordship, on the other hand, takes his madness someplace else. And he will find a new patron for his art... perhaps, he will make another fatherless child as a sacrifice to the muses?

CLARK

Then let him.

(CLARK signs the papers.)

If he hasn't the will to fight his own demons, he deserves them.

MAHAN

Very good.

AUBREY

We'll go have a little chat with Judge Cozart, and set the wheels of right in motion; then to face the beast in his lair. Are you ready?

CLARK

Remember, Aubrey, the beast has been sleeping...

(AUBREY, MAHAN, and CLARK exit.)

MISS IRIS

Sir... What do you want?

UNCLE THOMAS

What, my dear?

MISS IRIS

As a gift ... If someone were to give you a gift.

UNCLE THOMAS

Why do you ask?

MISS IRIS

You give many gifts, but I've never seen you receive a gift.

UNCLE THOMAS

It's hard to receive when you know everybody wants to give you something special, but you already have everything you need. You want, for their sakes, to think of that gift as if it were the only thing in the world you could call your own.

MISS IRIS

Still, if I could give you anything - even the impossible- what would it be?

UNCLE THOMAS (laughing)

To creep back the years from sixty-five to forty-five. It was the best time of my life - I had enough behind me to see the future; but now it's here, and I can't see any more than today... and the end. Oh, your party favor!

(He takes a party favor from the bowl.)

It works like this-

(He pops the favor. In it there is a little hat, a whistle, and candies.)

Look, even a whistle!

(He blows the whistle.)

Now, try yours.

(She pops the favor.)

MISS IRIS

I see ... A little hat ... a whistle ... candy ... Nothing that harms; nothing, but a little joy.

UNCLE THOMAS

Yes! A little joy...

MISS IRIS

Dear Uncle, I'm twenty-six; and I don't see too far into the future.

UNCLE THOMAS

Why not?

MISS IRIS

I see the now with frightful clarity.

(Blackout. End of Scene Two.)

SCENE THREE

SETTING: The same. Christmas morning. There are gifts under the Christmas Tree. The painting is missing.

AT RISE: AUBREY, MAHAN, and MISS IRIS are drinking coffee and eating cookies as they wait for UNCLE THOMAS and AUNT MALVINA to enter. CLARK is expected to arrive with the police.

AUBREY

I expect young Hamilton will be arriving soon with the authorities.

MISS IRIS

I hope this doesn't upset, Uncle Thomas. Could this not wait till tomorrow?

AUBREY

I doubt there will be a scene. If you haven't noticed, the painting is missing; and my guess is, so is his lordship. After our little talk last night, I am sure it was his only opportunity to save his beloved demon.

MISS IRIS

What about the painting?

MAHAN

What about it?

MISS IRIS

If he's taken the painting, the son is left with nothing!

MAHAN

If he hadn't stormed off in a fury last night, it would have been safely in his possession. That's what the documents were for.

AUBREY

It wasn't our responsibility.

(AUNT MALVINA enters.)

MAHAN

Did you look under the Tree?

AUBREY

Yes. He did it again.

MALVINA

Why does he do that? Look at this, Miss Iris. See these three gifts in the faded wrapping paper? One for Mr. Deschamps, one for Mrs. Nance, and one for your mother. Every year he puts them under the Tree.

MISS IRIS (to AUBREY)

What do you mean it is not our responsibility?

AUBREY

It was not our painting; you and I didn't bring that bummer into the house; and when all is said and done, everything returns to its restful state as if the whole thing was a bad dream. What matters, is that he's gone.

(UNCLE THOMAS enters. He is dress as a 19th Century version of Santa Clause – replete with green regalia.)

UNCLE THOMAS

Boys and girls, one and all, a Happy Christmas!

MAHAN

And and merry Christmas to you too, Saint Nickolas!

UNCLE THOMAS

I will now present the gifts. So, take a seat.

(AUBREY, and MAHAN take a seat. MISS IRIS remains standing. UNCLE THOMAS reaches for a present under the Tree.)

Oh, here's something for a lucky little boy... His name is Oscar!

(HE hands the present to AUBREY.)

AUBREY

Thank you, sir...

UNCLE THOMAS

Now, let us watch as his face lights up with delight. Come, my boy, let us see what you have?

(AUBREY opens HIS present. HE removes a doorknob.)

AUBREY

A doorknob?

AUNT MALVINA

Oh, son, that is no ordinary doorknob. It comes from the house of Lorenzo De Medici, also known as Lorenzo the Magnificent. A patron of the arts, and statesman; to which, I'm sure, much credit is due for making possible ... uh, well, exactly what he did, you'll have to look it.

AUBREY

Uncle, I'm speechless ...

UNCLE THOMAS

And now, little Albert, a gift for you.

(He gives a gift to MAHAN.)

MAHAN

Thank you, sir...

UNCLE THOMAS

I wonder what you have?

(MAHAN opens HIS present. It is an *ostraka*, which is a sherd of pottery with a name written on it.)

For the lawyer, there is an ostraka!

MAHAN

It looks like a piece of a broken pot to me.

AUNT MALVINA

Well, that it is... In Athens, from which these come, the jury would scratch the name of the man to be banished on a sherd of pottery... or is it a shard... no matter; yours says Themistocles.

MAHAN

Was he banished?

AUNT MALVINA

Perhaps, it is the nature of doing good - we make it, sometimes, in unkind ways... But our true friends stand by us. As for Themistocles, ask Xerxes about what happened at Salamis. The gift is a puzzle, and the answer will give you wisdom.

MAHAN

You mean, this piece of a pot is over two thousand years old? It must be worth a fortune!

UNCLE THOMAS

And I see, you're not wise, yet. But I have faith. Now you, Miss Iris....

(HE hands MISS IRIS a small present.)

MISS IRIS

Thank you, Uncle Thomas.

(She opens it. It is a simple little cameo pendant.)

UNCLE THOMAS

It's not a treasure – not too old, or even of much value; but it was my mother's, and I'd rather you have it.

MISS IRIS

It is a treasure ... And I have something for you ...

(SHE takes a small gift from the pocket in her frock.)

It, too, is not much; but it is from the heart...

(UNCLE THOMAS takes the gift.)

UNCLE THOMAS

For me? A gift for me? ...

(He smiles. AUBREY and MAHAN look at each other.)

MISS IRIS

Open it, sir...

(HE opens it. He takes out a pocket watch - not a valuable one.)

It was my father's watch.

UNCLE THOMAS

Yes, I remember... but, wait, an inscription... "Life is short, if we regret the things we have not done."

(AUBREY searches his coat pockets and pulls out a fountain pen.)

AUBREY

And this is from me. This fountain pen belonged to my father. It's not much, but Happy Christmas.

(HE gives the pen to UNCLE THOMAS.)

UNCLE THOMAS

Thank you, Aubrey!

(MAHAN takes off HIS tie clasp.)

MAHAN

And this tie clasp for me, sir. It has my regimental insignia engraved on it. From the days when we showed the world how Americans can fight.

UNCLE THOMAS

You wore a tie in battle?

(CLARK enters.)

CLARK

Where are the police? They said they'd be here at eleven o'clock.

UNCLE THOMAS

Ah, young Hamilton! You're just in time... I have a present with your name on it-

CLARK (To AUBREY)

Is he still here?

AUBREY

We have not been up to check, but we doubt it.

MAHAN

The painting is missing.

CLARK

I'd don't give a flip about that painting. Let him keep it, as long as he stay's out of my life.

(UNCLE THOMAS produces three gifts. Two are beautifully wrapped, the third is wrapped with brown paper and string.)

UNCLE THOMAS

This is strange ... There's another present for you, Mr. Clark. It isn't from me... Did any of you?

(Everybody looks at the package. CLARK takes it.)

AUNT MALVINA

There is a note... looks like a child's writing.

(CLARK opens the note. HE reads it.)

CLARK

So ...

(HE opens the package. Inside, there is the painting, the canvas cut up into shreds.)

Here's the painting ...

UNCLE THOMAS

The painting? Oh-my, it is! ... I didn't even-

CLARK

I can accept the loss of the painting, it was his after all. But this letter... this-

(He clears his throat.)

Will you excuse me for a minute...

(CLARK leaves the room.)

MISS IRIS

What does it say?

AUBREY

I think it says...

(MAHAN looks over AUBREY's shoulder.)

"Your mother was easy-

(A pause.)

"what's so special about you. I make bastards everywhere-

(AUNT MALVINA gasps.)

MAHAN

What do you make of that?

MISS IRIS

Would you let him finish!

AUBREY (reading)

"If the woman is stupid enough to fall for my" ... I can't tell ...

MAHAN

That's disgusting!

(At that moment, there is the sound of glass crashing. An object, like a body, passes by the garden window. Thereafter, the policemen arrive.)

(A silence.)

UNCLE THOMAS

Aubrey!

AUBREY

Sir?

UNCLE THOMAS

Could you check, and see who it is?

(AUBREY, opens the door leading to the garden and walks outside.)

AUBREY (from outside)

... It's his lordship...

UNCLE THOMAS

Is he alright?

(A pause.)

Aubrey?

(AUBREY reenters with two policemen. The police quickly make their way through the room, heading for the stairs in the entrance hall. AUBREY remains)

Is he alright?

AUBREY

I'm afraid not, Uncle... He landed on one of the three magi- the crown, with all it's bronze points, pierced forehead, both eyes, and the last point in the throat... I don't recommend going out there to take a look...

AUNT MALVINA

Good Lord, Thomas! What should we do?

UNCLE THOMAS

... So... uh... Miss Iris? Could you... Mr. Mahan, are you going to faint?

(MISS IRIS is stunned. HAHAN shakes his head, and coughs.)

... Never mind... Mr. Mahan, why don't you go up and see whether young Mr. Clark could use your services?

MAHAN (unsteady)

Yes, sir ...

(MAHAN exits. UNCLE THOMAS takes the old gifts out from underneath the Christmas Tree, one at a time; and then, places them in AUBREY's arms.)

AUBREY

What are you doing, sir?

AUNT MALVINA (in shock)

When the authorities take away our Italian nativity, tell them to be careful. The marble Jesus came from a flawless block, and cannot be replaced... might I also mention, the sculptor is dead, poor fellow... It was his last work-

AUBREY

Yes...

UNCLE THOMAS

And these gifts: one for Deschamps, one for Mrs. Nance, one for... Jack. This one stays. Please, take them away... someplace... later, we will dispose of them for good.

(AUBREY takes the gifts in his arms, and exits without another word. UNCLE THOMAS sits down on the sofa with AUNT MALVINA. He puts his arm around her.)

AUNT MALVINA

I pity that poor boy... It is all our fault, Thomas!

UNCLE THOMAS

Calm yourself, Malvina. We are without fault. None, in the slightest.

MISS IRIS (still stunned, rubbing her cameo)

I remember the story... It went like this: Jesus told a crowd who had caught a woman in the act of adultery, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone" ... That is, what he said?

UNCLE THOMAS

What? Yes, yes... That is what he said.

MISS IRIS

Would you... would you have given her a gift?

(End)